



Studies in Nehemiah

Nehemiah on His Knees in the Court of Heaven

As the King's cupbearer, Nehemiah occupied one of the most prestigious positions in the Persian empire. He moved in halls and chambers like none other in the world. He tasted food and drink like only a handful on earth would. He would have been the envy of many. Nevertheless, he knew of a more glorious and far more excellent court, and to this court he would retreat during free moments in his day and throughout the silent watches of the night (Neh. 1:6). There he found not lavishness, but holiness. There was not extravagance, but omnipotence. There were not delicacies, but rather mercies. It was the court of the King of heaven.

Burdened because of Ruined Zion

Before Nehemiah ever secured from the king on earth permission to rebuild Zion, he sought from the King of heaven *remission* for the sins of Zion. He went to prayer (v. 4). Nehemiah was burdened with Zion's stones and dust, and grieved her low estate. Zion's welfare was his chief delight. When Hanani, one of his brothers, came, he inquired earnestly after two things: Zion's remnant and Zion's ramparts (Neh. 1:2). When he heard of the remnant's reproach, and the ramparts' ruins, he took up a lamentation for her (v. 4).

How could he be unaffected while Zion's remnant pined away? How could he rejoice when Zion's fortunes were so low? How could he go about his task when Zion lay unprotected, a prey to every enemy desiring her hurt? Like his spiritual forefather Jeremiah, Nehemiah was hurt for the hurt of the daughter of his people (Jer. 8:20).

How is the work of God in your community? Are God's people languishing or thriving? Are Zion's defenses secure or are her walls punctured? When churches meet and report on the condition of the church in their time and place, must we echo Hanani? And then do we echo Nehemiah?

Seeking Audience with Heaven's King

When Nehemiah heard these sad tidings, he did not work out a plan with Hanani. He did not call the Jews in his vicinity to form an action committee or raise funds. He did not first bring it to the king's ear. Instead, he sought for God's ear. Why go to the ear of a mortal, when the divine ear is always open, perfectly sensible to the cries of the contrite, and able to move the wheels of divine providence however and whenever it is necessary?

Nehemiah addressed God with the greatest of reverence.

"O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments."

(Neh. 1:5)

Though he never mentioned Christ by name, we can say that he went to God in the name of Christ. How do we know? In his address, Nehemiah appealed on the one hand to the holiness of God and on the other to the mercy of God. He held them together in one, as they are perfectly held together in Christ. In Christ, God is both holy and merciful for a poor sinner like Nehemiah. In Christ, there is access to the throne of God.

Nehemiah was concerned about God's ear and God's eye (v. 6a). He was seeking God's face. He wanted his sad complaint to be heard by the ear of divine mercy and his helpless condition to come under the gaze of divine love. Had God not promised that He would look to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit (Isa. 66:2)? And are not God's ears open to the cries of the righteous (Ps. 34:15)?

To have the ears and eyes of the Almighty is an incomparable blessing. Of course, this is not something that all enjoy. *"The proud in vain thy favor seek."* It is only through the great Mediator, God in the flesh, that this is possible. He was not heard by God; God turned His eyes from Him in the day of trouble in order that there might be open ears and open eyes in heaven for all who truly seek the eyes and ears of God. Think of how approachable Christ's eyes and ears were when He was on the earth. To what crying beggar did Christ ever shut His ears? To what helpless penitent did He ever close His eyes? For His sake alone, Nehemiah could find an audience with the great King of heaven.

Confessing Israel's Corruption

After seeking God's audience, Nehemiah's first act in prayer was to spread the sinful condition of his people before the Lord. He did not begin with Israel's enemies, who had executed their ruin. No; in fact, Nehemiah understood that Israel's sin had brought about their ruin. Their enemies were only agents of God's just judgment. Their sin was the cause!

Moreover, he did not hide sin and misery, but confessed it before the Lord. He confessed their sin as his own ("we": 6b). He knew himself bound in a common sin with his nation. He did not lift himself above his people or exclude himself from their sin. He had an exalted estimate of God, and this went hand in hand with a low estimate of himself. The two always go together. His exalted estimate of God did not cause him to hide his true condition. His exalted estimate of God had slain his self-confidence. Like Isaiah, he cried *"woe"* and *"undone"* upon himself. He had learned to see some of the holiness of God (see Isa. 6:5).

He pictured Israel's condition in all its ugliness and guiltiness (v. 7). Indeed, they were a highly privileged people, having received the oracles of God through Moses. Yet, this only made their sin all the greater.

In this confession, Nehemiah also implicitly owned the righteousness of God. God was just in His verdict of sin and sinners. Man cannot mitigate it or make excuses to avoid it. However you turn it, sin is sin, and sin deserves the just judgment of God. God had threatened that by Moses, and He is just in all His ways. As a sinner, man is liable to full punishment and under the wrath of God.

Do we have something to learn from Nehemiah's confession of sin? Do we look past agents of calamity around us to our sin? Do we see sin as sin, as heinous, as inexcusable? Do we see God's judgment upon sin and sinners as altogether blameless and perfect? Do we see that God's judgment upon the church is the result of sin, our sin, my sin?

Pleading Promised Grace

Nehemiah's confession was indissolubly connected to his petition. Both spoke of sin. The former confessed sin; the latter sought deliverance from sin. The former lay bare the sin; the latter lay hold on forgiveness for the sin.

The essential petition of Nehemiah's prayer was very simple and very telling: *"Remember the word"* (Neh. 1:8). Nehemiah appealed to divine memory. You see, everything is already with God. We don't need to bring anything to God. We have nothing new; we cannot present anything new that the divine mind would not know or recognize. Salvation is a matter of God's promise. The application of salvation is a matter of the remembering of God's promise. To seek for salvation is to beseech God to remember His own word.

As simple as it is, Nehemiah's petition is most profound. He appealed to God's word of promise, which speaks of God's ability, mercy, one-sided faithfulness, and name (v. 8-9a). Everything a poor sinner and sinful people need lies in God's promise. They need mercy; He has promised mercy. They are helpless; He has promised to take hold of shield and buckler. They are unfaithful; He has promised never to remove His lovingkindness.

By appealing to God's promise, Nehemiah appealed to God Himself. What breadth, what height, what depth, what length! Satan cannot come between a sinner's plea for salvation and God the Savior. God is and has everything a sinner needs. If a sinful people would plead their history, Satan could fault them. If they would plead their leaders, Satan could bring objection. If they would plead their potential, Satan would have every right to accuse them.

Nehemiah also took hold of the horns on the altar, figuratively speaking. He pleaded the place where God has chosen to put His name (v. 9b). This is the sanctuary — the place of the burnt-offering. God had attached His Name and honor to the ordained revelation of atonement. God cannot refuse Nehemiah's supplication. What an everlasting marvel! Nehemiah in faith takes hold of God Himself (in Christ), and finds mercy, redemption, a future, all in God. Nehemiah's errand to the court of heaven cannot be in vain.

Questions:

1. In what ways is Nehemiah's prayer different from how you pray? What have you learned about prayer from Nehemiah and how might you pray differently in the future?
2. What would Hanani's report be concerning the condition of your church? What would Nehemiah's response be to this report?
3. What are some ways people typically deal with trouble in the church? How does Nehemiah show us here a more excellent way?
4. Why is confession of sin always necessary in prayer — not just in times of crisis? What does sin (v. 6) have to do with affliction (v. 3)?
5. What is the name of God, and why are we accustomed to pray in Jesus' name?
6. Are the eyes and ears of God what we seek from God or do His gifts occupy us more? How do we know when our prayer reaches His ears?

GM Bilkes

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